



HELP

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CONTACTS

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RELEVANT DEPARTMENT

helpfile@computershopper.co.uk
for all PC problems

softwarehelp@computershopper.co.uk
for help with software applications

buyinghelp@computershopper.co.uk
for advice on PC purchases

YOU CAN ALSO WRITE TO US AT:

Help
Computer Shopper
30 Cleveland Street
London
W1T 4JD

HELPFILE

DVD sound problems

Q I am having problems playing DVD films. The sound is crackly and the pictures are slightly jerky. I have a Toshiba Equium A100 notebook running Windows XP Media Center Edition. It has a 1.6GHz processor, integrated Realtek audio and an Nvidia GeForce Go 7300 graphics adaptor. The computer came with WinDVD and I added Nero 7 Premium later, which includes Nero Show Time.

At first, it played DVDs with no problems at all, but lately the sound is too bad for a pleasant viewing experience. I use the earphone socket to power earphones or as an input to a hi-fi. I tried reinstalling Nero, but do not know how to reinstall WinDVD because the Toshiba recovery disc contains no instructions, and I hesitate to run it.

The DVD drive seems to be fine and copies data both ways. Undemanding computer games such as Half-Life run fine.

Tony Fisher, tony@2000fisher.freemove.co.uk

A The jerky pictures suggest that your IDE controller is not set to Direct Memory Access (DMA) mode. DMA mode allows the DVD drive to transfer data to memory without involving the processor. Since the alternative PIO transfers demand a lot of processor time, the processor gets maxed out, video gets jerky and sound processing will also be interfered with.

Right-click on My Computer, choose Properties, then the Hardware tab, and click the Device Manager button. Click on the + sign beside IDE ATA/ATAPI Controllers and you should see a main entry that specifies the make and model of the IDE controller (such as Intel 82801DB). This will be followed by two entries for Primary and Secondary IDE Channel. Your DVD is probably on the secondary channel, so click that to open its Properties, then select the Advanced Settings tab. The transfer mode should be set to 'DMA if available' and, beneath it, the current transfer mode should read 'Ultra DMA Mode 2' or something similar.

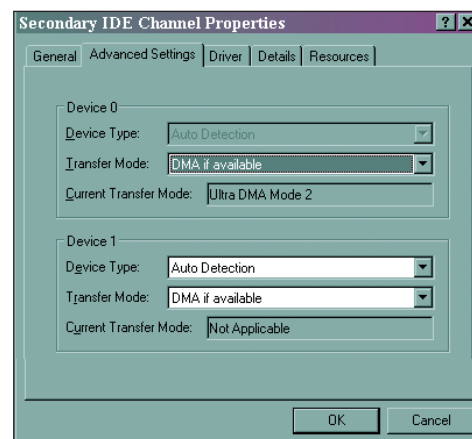
If the transfer mode was set to PIO only, change it to 'DMA if available'. That should solve the problem. Sometimes you may find that, even though 'Use DMA if available' is selected, the current transfer mode is PIO. Microsoft says this may happen if there are errors

during a DMA transfer, but that the system should revert to DMA mode after a reboot. Sometimes a glitch causes your IDE controller to assume that the DVD drive can't use DMA mode and it will stay in PIO only mode.

I have heard reports that trying to read a bad CD or DVD can cause this to happen, while in other cases bugs on resuming from standby or hibernation cause it. Repeated data transfer errors could indicate a bad cable or, more rarely, a bad drive.

If this has happened, Microsoft says that you can fix it by changing the setting first to PIO only, then back to 'DMA if available'. We've found that often switching options or deleting DVD devices won't make any difference. The easiest way to fix the problem is to remove the main entry for the IDE controller (usually the one that names the chipset manufacturer) then reboot. This forces it to be redetected. Hopefully on redetection the IDE controller will correctly recognise the DVD drive as being DMA-capable.

Finally, problems with chipset drivers can result in DMA mode being disabled for all devices. This is more likely to happen with Via and other non-Intel chipsets. If you have this problem, install the latest chipset drivers for your chipset. More information is available at <http://winhlp.com/node/10>.



▲ Change the transfer mode to 'DMA if available' to give the DVD drive efficient access to data

Last track of audio CD is too long

Q When ripping audio CDs in iTunes, I've noticed that the last track is often very large, being much longer than the actual song itself. Presumably this is an anti-piracy measure. What is the easiest way of editing the MP3 file to remove the blank bit at the end?

David Anning, david.anning@tiscali.co.uk

A The long last track may be the result of copy protection, but it's most often a hidden bonus track, which is usually part of the last

track but separated by a long period of silence. To cut the play length in iTunes, right-click on the file and select Get Info. Under the Options tab, check the box next to Stop Time and change the time to when you want the track to stop.

If you want more control over the length and the size of the file, you could try using an MP3 file editor. Our favourite is the free version of WavePad from www.nch.com.au. This MP3 file editor displays the file graphically, thereby allowing you to see where the blank portion actually starts.

What do all the disk error messages mean?

Q My Windows XP (SP2) computer is playing up and giving me loads of error messages. When I start it, I see the XP logo with the blue bar underneath, as normal, and then it presents a blue screen and wants to run Chkdsk. A countdown starts and then Chkdsk runs (1 of 3). It gets to 100 per cent and fills the screen with a repeated line of "Inserting an index entry into index \$0 of file 25".

This runs endlessly, so I shut down the computer. When I restart and prevent Chkdsk running, I still get error messages, but I can close these and log on while closing all subsequent error messages. The first error message is "WINLOGON.EXE - corrupt file" followed by "The file or directory \Extend\ \$ObjId is corrupt and unreadable. Please run the Chkdsk utility." All other error messages have a different header, but state the same file.

Robert Cooper, whopper1@ntlworld.com

A The file \$Extend\ \$ObjId is a meta-data file, which is a special hidden file used by the NTFS to store file system information. It will usually be found in position 24 or 25 of the Master File table and contains an index to the unique object identifier numbers that NTFS allocates to every file on your computer. This information is used by an NT service called Distributed Link Tracking, which is used to keep track of files referred to from another file.

For example, if you create a shortcut to a file and then move or rename the original file, Distributed Link Tracking helps maintain the link. More importantly, it is also used by Object Linking and Embedding (OLE), which is used by Microsoft Office and other applications when you embed an Excel spreadsheet into a Word document, for example. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Object_Linking_and_Embedding for more details of this. This index is not essential, and you can still use Windows and OLE with the FAT32 file system, which does not support object identifiers. However, if you use NTFS there is no way to turn it off.

Since \$Extend\ \$ObjId contains an index to every file on the drive, it is fairly large and, if it gets damaged, will take a very long time to rebuild. In some cases, Chkdsk can take 12 hours or more of repeatedly "inserting an index entry into index \$0 of file 25". You can either wait and let it finish, or interrupt it, in which case it will run again as soon as you restart the computer (unless you press a key to skip the disk check). The computer will run fine without this file and you can use the chknfs command to prevent Windows running Chkdsk at startup on that drive. However, we would not recommend this, as it could lead to serious disk corruption.

WHY THE CORRUPTION?

What is more worrying is the cause of the initial corruption that led to your problem. It could have been due to a power interruption while NTFS was updating the file, but may also be an early sign of impending hard disk failure.

We suggest that you back up your data and then download your hard disk manufacturer's diagnostic utility and do a complete test of the drive. Some drives (particularly certain brands of notebook drive) may suffer from random lock-ups, or develop areas of the drive that are very slow to access. These may not be revealed by the standard diagnostics, but can sometimes be detected by a free diagnostic program called MHDD (<http://hddguru.com>).

Occasionally the \$Extend\ \$ObjId file gets so fragmented that updating it can take a long time, perhaps causing problems if the file hasn't finished updating on shutdown. This will usually occur only if some of the sectors used are very slow to access (suggesting likely physical problems). Defrag cannot defragment this file because of its special system status, nor can other defragmentation utilities such as PageDefrag (<http://tinyurl.com/y8jsyn>).

If problems occur repeatedly, and there is no other evidence of physical problems with the drive, the only solution is to reformat the entire partition.

Your experts

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Paul Mullen

With 27 years of PC experience as a power user, programmer and IT consultant, Paul Mullen answers all PC problems, tackling hardware, system and security issues.



helpfile@computershopper.co.uk

SOFTWARE HELP

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Kay Ewbank

Database developer and productivity expert Kay Ewbank offers help with office applications.



Ben Pitt

Professional musician and keen photographer Ben Pitt gives advice on using creative software.



softwarehelp@computershopper.co.uk

BUYING HELP

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Chris Finnamore

Labs Manager Chris Finnamore recommends the best products for your requirements.



buyinghelp@computershopper.co.uk

CONTACTS

Please contact the relevant department at the email address listed above. You can also write to us at:

**Help
Computer Shopper
30 Cleveland Street
London
W1T 4JD**

Please try to give full details of your problem. We need an email address or daytime and evening telephone numbers in case we need more information.

Although the policy of Computer Shopper is not to publish readers' email addresses, we include them in Help so that other readers with experience of similar problems can share their solution (please also cc any comments to the relevant Help department above). If you would prefer not to have your email address published, please say so. ☺

Trojan and virus problem

Q I recently visited a site through a search engine and now I am receiving a Windows pop-up every minute warning me that my computer is making unauthorised files and that I should scan to remove and detect viruses. The pop-up doesn't look legitimate, and I am worried about the security on my PC.

I have Windows Vista Home Edition on the PC and I have run a virus checker, which found a Trojan. I immediately quarantined this, but the pop-up still appears. I have also tried to remove the infected file, but I cannot find it on my system.

Tracy Hall, tjh35@hotmail.co.uk

A It looks like you have been infected with one of the many variants of SmitFraud. The Trojan itself was probably called Zlob. Other hidden code will keep reinstalling the Trojan.

Despite Vista's supposed security improvements, which were designed to stop spyware from installing itself without permission, we have come across many Vista systems that have been infected with SmitFraud

variants. We are not sure if this is because SmitFraud has found a way round the security measures, or whether users get so used to having to click OK to a security warning that they either do so automatically or simply turn off the warnings.

Because this software keeps changing to avoid easy detection, you should download several anti-spyware programs. We suggest the free versions of AVG Anti-Spyware, Ad-Aware 2007 and Spybot Search & Destroy. Install and update these, but don't scan yet. Also, get Siri's SmitFraud fix tool from <http://siri.urz.free.fr/Fix/SmitfraudFix.exe>.

Restart your computer in Safe Mode before scanning. To do this, press the F8 key repeatedly as you start your PC, before the first Windows splash screen appears. Next, run SmitFraud Fix, followed by each of the other anti-spyware programs in turn. You must scan in Safe Mode to avoid reinfection.

To avoid this happening again, we suggest that you download the free version of Site Advisor from www.siteadvisor.com. This marks search results with symbols denoting the sites you should avoid.

Vista upgrade always fails

Q One of my friends has a Windows XP Home Edition computer with 2GB of RAM, an Intel Pentium D processor, 250GB hard disk and an Nvidia GeForce 7950GTX graphics card. It has the most up-to-date BIOS version, too. We decided to install Windows Vista Ultimate Edition on it and the Upgrade Advisor said it could run the Ultimate Edition, finding no compatibility issues whatsoever.

When I attempted to do the upgrade, I opted to have it check online for installation updates and then selected the in-place upgrade. When it gets to the final stage, it says "Completing Upgrade, 65%". Then a blue screen of death flashes up, followed by a reboot. I see a message box saying that the upgrade wasn't successful and that it is restoring my previous version of Windows.

How can this be, when this computer is really powerful and has no compatibility issues? I have even tried disabling the anti-virus software temporarily during the installation, but to no avail. I have tried eight times, but it fails each time.

D Johnson,

242JohnsonD@frederickgoughschool.co.uk

A There is obviously a compatibility issue that is preventing the upgrade from working. You should always use the latest version of the Upgrade Advisor from Microsoft's website at <http://tinyurl.com/3b27j6>. This contains many additional checks that were not included in the version that comes on the Vista disc. Even if the PC

passes the Upgrade Advisor test, you may still have a software incompatibility for which the Advisor does not check.

Because Vista has had so many driver-related problems and is so hungry for computing resources, we do not like to upgrade any systems from Windows XP to Vista. New systems designed to run Vista will use only components known to have reliable Vista drivers and so are less likely to have driver issues. It is already hard to find Windows XP drivers for some new HP/Compaq and Toshiba systems.

Even when we do upgrade a system, we don't like to use the in-place upgrade option to upgrade from Windows XP to Vista. In many cases, incompatibilities arise that were not spotted by the Upgrade Advisor. Even if it works, it produces a messy system that will not run as fast as a clean upgrade. It is usually better to use the new Windows Easy Transfer utility to save all your settings to a CD or DVD, then do a clean install of Vista.

Another approach, which may be necessary if the upgrade fails and leaves an unbootable system, is to do a clean install of Windows XP and upgrade that. Although the Upgrade versions of Vista come on bootable DVDs, they will not accept the licence code unless they are started from a previous version of Windows.

UPGRADING ERRORS

There are three main causes of errors while upgrading. First, you may have some hardware problems such as a damaged hard disk or flaky memory. These may show up only when you upgrade to the more demanding Vista. Second,

despite the Upgrade Advisor giving you the OK, there may be device driver issues. These most commonly occur with RAID drives. You may need to press F6 during setup and supply the correct driver. Fortunately, Vista allows you to supply the driver on a CD or USB flash drive and not just on a floppy, like Windows XP did.

Finally, and most commonly, there may be some software on your PC that is incompatible. Upgrade Advisor cannot check for every compatibility issue. The incompatible software could be something you didn't know you had on your system, such as a virus or spyware.

We strongly advise uninstalling any anti-virus or anti-spyware software, rather than simply disabling it. This is because they are designed to prevent changes to critical system files. You can then reinstall them after upgrading.

If your copy of Windows XP was set to restart automatically after errors, which is the default, Vista will do the same. This makes it hard to read what the blue screen message says. To prevent this restart, right-click on My Computer, choose Properties then click on the Advanced tab and click the Settings button under Startup and Recovery. Untick the Automatically Restart option. Sometimes the BSOD error information may give a clue as to which driver is causing the error, but in other cases it is hard to tell whether the error is hardware- or driver-related.

You don't mention which motherboard your system uses, but Vista has had many problems with Nvidia motherboard chipsets preventing an upgrade installation. Clean installs usually work, though.

Feedback Computer incredibly slow when first turned on

✉ After reading Steve Beers' question and your answer in the October edition of *Shopper*, I thought I should write with my own experiences of slow booting. I have an HP/Compaq notebook with an AMD processor and 512MB of memory. It runs Windows XP Home Edition with Service Pack 2 (SP2) and the latest updates from Microsoft.

At first, I thought Steve's email described the symptoms I was getting, but on closer inspection I realised that my machine must have a slightly different problem. When I do a cold boot, everything appears normal for the first part of the sequence. The virus checker starts up normally, all the desktop icons appear and about two thirds of the System Tray icons also appear. The system then appears to sleep for about two minutes, after which a security warning appears to say there is no firewall running. This lasts about 10 seconds, and then the rest of the System Tray icons appear and the machine runs normally.

The SP2 firewall is also running normally when the sequence is complete. I first noticed this slight hesitation during the boot process about eight or nine months ago, and it has got gradually worse since. I cannot remember when the firewall warning first

appeared, but it was some time after SP2 was installed. One of my colleagues is also getting the same firewall warning when his Windows XP Home Edition system boots.

Unlike Steve's system, when the system is in its two-minute sleep, Ctrl-Alt-Del reveals only one or two per cent of the processor is in use, and there is no disk activity. I am not seeing any processor-hogging processes running. This phenomenon is only a minor irritation to me, as I normally hibernate the system when not in use rather than closing it down completely. I find the hibernate feature on Windows XP works well, and the system restarts in under 30 seconds (with a further few seconds to renegotiate its IP address from the DHCP service on my broadband router).

You mentioned that this problem could be related to the update service. This brings me on to a comment in your reply to the query from Jack Jeffs ('Windows Update keeps rebooting my computer'), which is also in the October issue. I have my Windows XP system set up to 'Download updates for me, but let me choose when to install them'. An icon appears in the System Tray when updates are ready for installation and a comment balloon appears explaining that the updates are ready. I normally close the balloon, and at a convenient time (sometimes a day or two

later) I click on the System Tray icon to initiate the installation of the updates and complete the associated full reboot. This mode of operation can be achieved without having to edit the Registry, with the potential pitfalls that can cause.

Richard Taylor,
richard.taylor@consultant.com

A Long delays with little processor use or disk activity suggest that Windows is waiting on some network resource. Several network queries have fairly long time-out periods. It could be trying to connect to a previously mapped network drive that may not now be available. Mapped network shares in My Network Places or shortcuts on the desktop or Start menu to network files can cause this.

The firewall warning is just a consequence of this delay. We believe the firewall itself is functional during this time, but the module that checks its status has not yet loaded.

Unfortunately, changing the automatic update option to let you choose when to install updates has no effect on the update service bug. The hogging of processor time on certain systems occurs while the service is checking which updates have already been installed, before it goes online to get the list of updates.

Netgear router confusion

Q I've been having a problem with Netgear regarding its RangeMax NEXT WNR834B router. I need a Draft-N router with a long range and good quality of service (QoS). I want to be able to connect it to my older Belkin modem/router, which I will just be using as a modem, since I have learned how to tweak the signal-to-noise ratio to get a stable sync at a full 8Mbit/s. I would like to be able to do a similar trick with other routers.

The Belkin router has no QoS whatsoever, which is why I want to buy a new one. However, if I am going to buy a new router I want to improve the WiFi range using MIMO.

The problem with Netgear's WNR834B is that there are two versions of the same model router, each with different chipsets. Only the version 2 router supports QoS, and version 1 cannot be upgraded to version 2 using firmware. When you try to buy the router online, no company knows which version it is selling. The only way to tell is by reading the packaging, which will have WNR834Bv2 on it.

This means I need to phone the retailers and ask them to check their stock physically. I went and hand-checked in PC World and Comet, but they both had version 1. I am having difficulty finding version 2, at least affordably.

Darrin Maunders, darrin@maunders.com

A Netgear's current product description of the WNR834B, which has been repeated at many online stores, emphasises the advantages of its QoS

support. By contrast, many earlier reviews of the WNR834B criticised it for its lack of QoS support and poor reception at long range.

QoS is very important if you want to use a VoIP phone or watch streaming video while someone else in your family is downloading files or running a peer-to-peer file transfer program. What you don't want is for the low-priority file transfers to slow down the speed-sensitive, real-time activities.

It is actually fairly common for networking companies to produce several different versions of a device using different chipsets. There are so many new versions coming out that they try to avoid confusion by using only a new model number when major features change. Retailers like this situation, because they can continue to sell old stock, which in most cases won't matter for consumers, as old and new models have essentially the same features.

Unfortunately, in this case Netgear has chosen to tout QoS as a major feature of the current model without mentioning that the old stock does not support it. As we understand it, while version 1 was criticised for poor reception at longer ranges, the version 2 chipset improves on this.

Since many retailers have updated their websites to include QoS in the product description, we would hope that they are selling the new version. However, in some cases we have seen sites use the new description when they are selling old stock. If you have bought one from a site that advertised the QoS feature, you are entitled to get the newer version.

Bear in mind that the proposed 802.11n standard is still in draft form and has several



▲ Is this WNR834B router the version 1 or 2 model? If possible, check before you buy

revisions, the latest of which is Draft 2.0. The final standard is not expected to be published until March 2009. That said, it is unlikely to differ drastically from Draft 2.0. Early Draft-N equipment was based on Draft 1.0, which has been found to have several problems.

The WiFi Alliance, a trade group, has started to certify equipment as compliant with Draft 2.0. Before buying any Draft-N equipment, make sure that it was certified as compliant with the Draft 2.0 standard. You can check if a product is certified at the WiFi Alliance's website (www.wi-fi.org).

Motherboard won't see DVI monitor

Q I built my PC using an Asus A8N-VM-CSM motherboard with an Athlon 64 3200 processor. This motherboard has both VGA and DVI display outputs, and my ViewSonic VG720 TFT monitor can accept either as an input.

However, a strange problem occurs 90 per cent of the time when using the DVI connection. When I choose to hibernate the PC, I get the message "Preparing to hibernate" and then, instead of the hibernate screen, I just get a blank screen and the monitor reports "No digital signal". However, the PC hibernates and turns off as it should and, when switching on again, it resumes from hibernation.

Other times when I boot the PC, after the Windows XP screen appears, I get a blank screen and the message "no digital input", even though the PC will continue to boot up normally. The only way I can get to see what the PC is displaying is by connecting my monitor to the analogue VGA output. Then, usually after shutdown and changing to DVI, it all works fine for a little while.

I have the latest BIOS and Nvidia drivers for this motherboard. Can you please suggest

what may be the cause of this problem, and if there could be a fault in the motherboard?

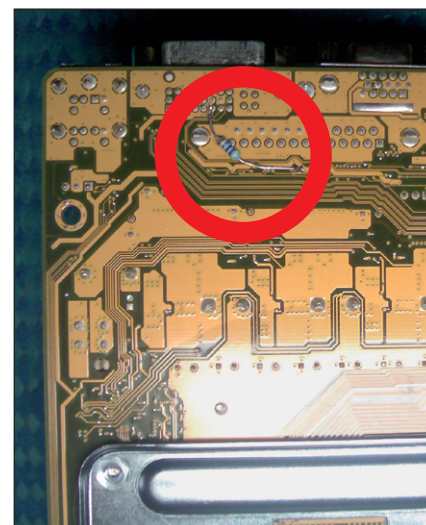
Leslie Robinson,
robinsonles@btopenworld.com

A Your problem is partly driver-related and partly a hardware flaw. First, the Windows drivers check for a DVI monitor at startup and, if they don't see one, disable the DVI output. Make sure the LCD screen is turned on before the computer. Linux drivers allow the user to force a DVI output. It is possible a later driver may refine the DVI detection to make it more reliable.

The hardware issue is that the DVI connector does not provide sufficient voltage to detect DVI devices reliably. Some devices work while others are never detected. The problem is particularly bad when long cables are used, such as with digital projectors. There are reports of digital projectors not working with this motherboard but working fine if a separate graphics card is used.

Several users of this motherboard have found that the voltage can be increased by soldering a 8K ohm resistor between pin 6 (Clk signal) of the DVI connection and a five-volt supply, as in the picture shown here. This can enable detection of video projectors and other devices.

You should only attempt this if you are confident in your soldering skills, as careless soldering could easily damage the motherboard. More details are available at <http://tinyurl.com/32hgoj> and at <http://tinyurl.com/2trtv>.



▲ Enable detection of a projector by soldering a resistor to your motherboard, if you dare

Have I been ripped off?

Q I recently bought a desktop computer from a UK company through eBay. The computer was advertised as Intel Core 2 Duo E6550, with 2GB DDR2/250 and GB/ATI 1GB GFX. The processor speed was advertised as 6.55GHz.

After I received the computer, I checked the details on the screen when starting it up. These told me that it had an Intel Core 2 Duo processor running at 2.33GHz. To work out the processor speed, do you multiply the 2.33 by two (both cores)?

I asked the company via email if the computer's specification was correct, and whether it matched the 6.55GHz as advertised. The company's reply was this: "The way the Core 2 Duo works is 2x 2.33GHz cores and, because they both run together, it is then 40 per cent quicker than the actual speed, hence where the 6GHz comes from." Is this correct?

The graphics card was advertised thus: "Massive 1GB ATI Radeon graphics card, ATI Radeon X1050 Core running at 400MHz, DDR memory running at 400MHz, 128-bit Memory Interface Hypermemory Technology allowing up to 1GB memory. Outstanding gaming experience with Asus exclusive innovations."

On checking the card in the computer, it is labelled 'HIS x1,050 hypermemory with 128MB DDR (64-bit)'. Is this correct? I am sorry if these questions are basic, but I am

afraid that my technical knowledge is just that. I am just trying to establish if I have been sold a computer that was wrongly or unfairly advertised.

Lee Butterwick, lee@butterwick.freemove.co.uk

A The seller's claims are totally wrong. Unlike AMD performance ratings, which do indicate performance, the Intel processor numbers are not performance-related in any way and just indicate the processor type and series. So E6550 is not a speed, but just a model number in the Core 2 Duo family. It is nowhere near the fastest in the range.

This processor has a clock speed of 2.33MHz and it has two cores, but you can't just double the performance because of bottlenecks in scheduling tasks between the two cores. Much of the time, one core will be waiting on the other. That is where the 40 per cent comes from. The second core, and other design differences from previous Pentium 4 processors, will add about 40 per cent to the performance.

A lot of other factors affect performance, such as the number of clock cycles each operation takes, and the amount of cache memory. The Core 2 Duo, which is based on the Pentium M, does more work in each clock cycle than a Pentium 4 processor.

The comparative speed of different processors depends on the kind of calculation it is doing. One processor may be better at certain

calculations. On some benchmarks, such as the 3DMark06 test, your processor could outperform an AMD Athlon 64 X2 5200+, so it might be possible for the vendors to find a particular benchmark where this processor is twice as fast as some 3.3GHz processors. That still does not make it a 6.55GHz processor. Currently, there is no such thing. You do appear to have the advertised model of the Core 2 Duo, which is a nice, reasonably priced processor.

Your graphics card does not have 1GB of graphics memory, although even big companies such as Dell have been guilty of this error. A graphics card may have only 256MB, but its hypermemory feature allows it to use system memory to supplement the dedicated graphics memory, up to four times the actual memory. So a card with only 256MB can behave in some ways as if it had 1GB of memory.

We are concerned that you may not have been given that much memory, though, because you appear to have only 128MB DDR memory on the card, and this equates to only 512MB of hypermemory. Also, the card is from HIS, not Asus as promised, so it is definitely not what was advertised.

Whether you have been ripped off depends on the price you paid. It seems a fairly good specification, but it is not what was advertised. If you're unhappy you can use eBay's complaints procedure. If you paid by PayPal, you may be entitled to a refund. Always check seller ratings carefully before buying through eBay.

Problem with dll file

Q I have a Dell Dimension 9200 PC running Vista Home Premium. I have Office 2007 Enterprise edition and when I open certain applications, including Windows Mail, Picture Viewer or any Excel document, the following dialog box pops up: "Bad Image - C:\Windows\System32\msimtf.dll is either not designed to run on Windows or it contains an error."

When I click OK, the program runs as normal and I am allowed to save my work. I have looked up this type of file and found that msimtf.dll is a keylogger and could be spyware. I have run checks using Spydoctor and other utilities, but they didn't pick anything up. I am currently using Panda

Internet security from the August issue's cover DVD.

Robert Pritchard,

robert_pritchard@blueyonder.co.uk

A You need to be very careful when researching filenames on the internet. There are lots of websites that want to emphasise the dangers of spyware to convince you to buy their anti-spyware products. While some of these sites contain useful information, others simply exaggerate the dangers.

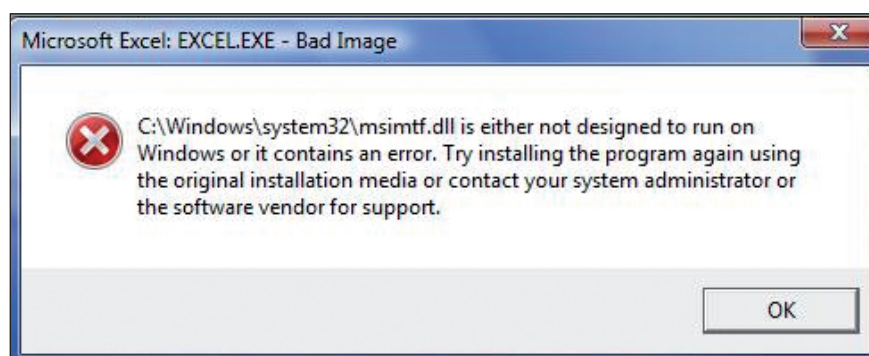
Msimtf.dll is a standard component of Windows and also comes with Microsoft Office. Internally, it is cryptically named 'Active IMM Server DLL', but it is part of Alternative User

Input Text Input Services, which allows you to use speech-recognition software or to input foreign alphabets such as Arabic without having the appropriate keyboard.

There have been reports that this filename has been used by spyware, but we have been unable to confirm these. We suspect that reports of the file being a keylogger are erroneous. In any case, every Windows 2000, XP or Vista system should have this file and, unless anti-spyware software identifies the file as suspicious, you should assume that it is a standard part of Windows. The file on your system is too corrupted to load, so can't do anything anyway.

Although the message you received is new with Vista, a similar message sometimes appears in Windows XP. It reads: "Bad Image. The application or DLL C:\Windows\System32\msimtf.dll is not a valid Windows image. Please check this against your installation diskette." It appears that when Microsoft Office is installed or updated, it can sometimes corrupt this file. Reinstalling Microsoft Office should fix the error.

However, if you don't want to use speech recognition or type in foreign languages, you can just turn off Alternative Input Services. This should also help speed up the loading of Office applications. Microsoft has not yet given instructions for doing this with Vista, but the procedure should be similar to that for Windows XP and Office 2003, which is described at <http://support.microsoft.com/?kbid=282599>.



▲ Reinstall Office to replace a corrupt msimtf.dll file, or disable Alternative Input Services to avoid this error

My PC reboots on its own

Q My computer sometimes reboots on its own. Recently, it failed repeatedly within a few seconds of being turned on. Because of this I'm guessing there is a power supply problem. I assume no virus would be able to affect the PC that early in the boot process. However, all the hardware parts are good quality. The power supply is a 350W model from QuietPC.com, while the motherboard is an Asus A7N8X.

Today, over several hours, the PC has rebooted just once. I have a feeling that the problem has grown gradually worse over a long period of time. I used to think it was a bad connection with the AC cord inlet, but I have tried testing with a continuity meter while flexing it and it seems all right.

I have reseated the memory modules, HDD/ATX power connector and IDE headers and replaced the silicone heatsink compound on the processor. I've had one unexplained reboot since.

Another problem is that, two days ago, I had to run Chkdsk with a surface scan because dire warnings appeared when the PC booted up. This same requirement for a surface scan occurred once about a year ago. That time, I first tried the Samsung disk test utility (my hard disk is a Samsung SP1213N), which reported no problems. I had hoped to avoid the need for a surface scan because, as far as I understood, the Samsung software had already done that, and much faster. However, a surface scan was still needed.

The surface scan passed OK. I cannot understand why Windows insisted on a surface scan, only for a full scan to show that all is well. What is a sensible course of action?

Stephen Bernhoeft, sjb@abelgratis.co.uk

A It is a good idea to start by cleaning all contacts and reseating components. A bad contact with a memory module or a loose graphics card could cause this problem as the computer warms up. While inside the computer, inspect all capacitors for any sign of bulging or leakage. Capacitors are there to smooth the power supply to components such as memory modules. If they have failed, they can allow voltage drops, which may lead to a reboot.

The reboots could also be related to software, such as a bad device driver. It is best to boot from a CD with its own operating system. You could try Knoppix (www.knoppix.com). Some computers, including most Dell PCs, have built-in diagnostics that don't depend on Windows. Alternatively, they may come with diagnostics on a CD. The Ultimate Boot CD (www.ultimatebootcd.com) is self-booting and contains diagnostic programs. If your computer still reboots while running these, you know that the rebooting is related to the PC's hardware.

It is tricky to spot the problem if it only reboots once a day, so solving this may take some time. We think you need to run some hardware diagnostics, such as a memory tester, from the Ultimate Boot CD. This won't affect Windows. Just set the boot order in the BIOS to

boot from the CD. You'd probably have to leave it running all day, perhaps for several days, to be sure the reboots weren't caused by hardware.

If your power cable from the wall to the back of the computer is old, try replacing it. Often the plug that goes into the back of the computer does not make good contact. In the UK, with our clunky 13A plugs, the fuse holder in the plug is another frequent cause of bad contacts.

If Windows insists on a surface scan, it is because it was unable to read or write a particular area of the drive. It insists on running Chkdsk's surface scan as it wants to mark any unusable clusters as 'bad', so the system won't try to use them again. It also tries to move data from them. There should be details in the Event Log. You should run Eventvwr.msc to see this.

It is possible for a hard disk to have intermittent lock-ups that don't show up in sequential disk read tests, such as Chkdsk and those from most manufacturer diagnostics. The random seek test in MHDD, on the Ultimate Boot CD, has the best chance of detecting these. However, it is rare (although possible) for a hard disk problem to cause the computer to reboot. It is more likely to cause the computer to lock up.

It is far more likely that the apparent disk I/O error was caused by some other problem, such as bad memory, processor or motherboard. This would cause a garbled command to be sent to the hard disk. Such a problem would be likely to explain the rebooting, too. Ultimately, you may find the problem only by replacing all the components one by one.

Connecting a notebook to a TV

Q I would like to use my Acer Aspire 3634WLMi PC for karaoke. I have all my karaoke files on an external hard disk connected by USB.

I need to know if there is any way I can connect the video output to a television, either by SCART or composite video. The only port I have is a 15-pin D socket for an external monitor.

Charles Leivers, charlesroy.leivers@virgin.net

A What you want is possible, but it can be tricky, as many TV sets aren't well suited to displaying computer screen images. Basically, all except high-end TV sets accept only composite input, or RGB+ composite sync signal, and most computer graphics cards don't generate composite output. VGA has separate horizontal and vertical sync signals. Some newer TV sets, usually the more expensive ones, accept S-video and some PC display adaptors will output S-video, enabling you to use a fairly cheap cable.

Unlike computer monitors, which are designed to adapt to

multiple frequencies, all except for the latest expensive LCD TV sets accept signals only at a single frequency, so most computer display adaptors will not use the correct frequency that a TV set needs. Finally, most computer equipment is designed for use in the USA, which uses a TV system called NTSC, while in Europe we use PAL.

Nowadays many computer display cards and notebook computers have built-in TV S-video out sockets. Yours has the old 15-pin connector,

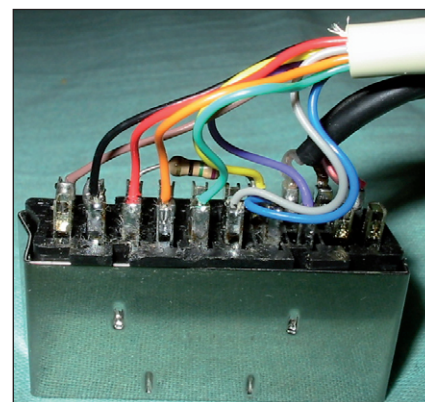
commonly referred to as VGA.

A few high-end LCD TV sets also have a direct VGA or DVI computer input so they can be used as a monitor for a PC. It seems you are in the common situation where the computer has only a VGA output and the TV has a SCART connector that accepts only a RGB+ composite sync signal.

There are two possible approaches to the problem. You can buy or make a cheap connecting cable and then use software to adapt the output frequency to match the TV (which is still likely to give a lot of screen flicker), or you can go for a fairly expensive adaptor that tries to



▲ The easy way to view PC output on a TV



▲ The hard way to view PC output on a TV: build your own connecting cable

deal with these problems. The cheap approach is described at <http://ryoandr.free.fr>.

The more expensive device is called a scan converter. These can cost several hundred pounds. The cheapest we have found is the Avermedia KeyLite (or AverKey Lite). It costs around £50. We have not tested it. In any case, the quality of the picture from a converter can be dependent on the TV set to which it is connected. Still, it is available from www.howtoconvert.co.uk/howvga2vid.htm (call 01634 315195). More models and information can be found at www.avermedia.co.uk/avermedia. **CS**